Battle in the River of Heaven

Monkey Series 13

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The Tang Priest and his disciples were blocked by a big river on their way to fetch the scriptures from the Western Heaven. Pig picked up a stone and threw it into the water; they heard bubbles rising as the stone sank. "It's deep, too deep," he said. "We'll never get across."

Monkey sprang into midair on his cloud and took a good look. He saw big waves in the endless river and on the river bank ahead a stone tablet on which the three words "River of Heaven" were carved. He couldn't help crying out, "It's wide, Master, very wide. We'll never get across it."

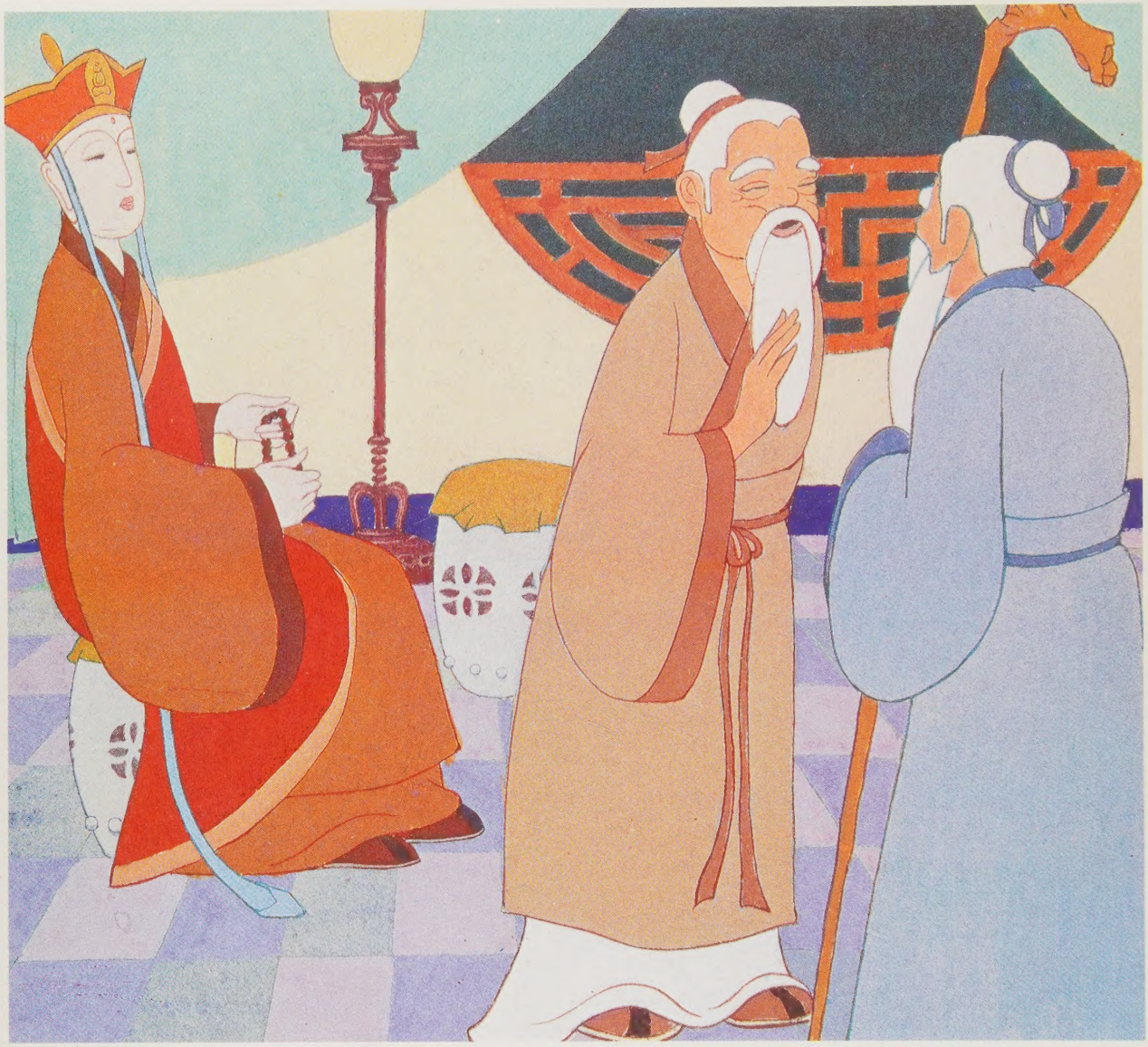
The Tang Priest was speechless with shock, then he sobbed, "What are we to do, disciples?" "Listen, Master," said Pig. "Over there you can hear the sound of drums and music. It must be people holding a religious feast. Let's go and get some food to eat and find out where there is a boat to ferry us across the river."

They headed towards the music and saw a house at the end of the road. The inside was bright with candles and lanterns, and there were clouds of incense. The Tang Priest got off his horse and told his disciples, "You wait for me here. I'll go and ask for shelter."

Just as he reached the gate he saw an old man about to close the door. The Tang Priest bowed and said, "I salute you, benefactor." "You're too late, monk, to get anything to eat," the old man said. The Tang Priest bowed again and replied, "I have been sent by the Emperor of the Great Tang in the East to fetch the scriptures from the Western Heaven. I have come here to beg for a night's shelter."

The old man couldn't believe that he had walked so far by himself. The Tang Priest said, "I have three disciples who protect me," and he turned around and called, "Come here, disciples." The moment the three disciples heard their master calling they ran like the wind. The sight of them gave the old man such a fright that he collapsed, muttering, "Demons, demons."

The Tang Priest helped the old man up and said, "Please don't be afraid, benefactor. They may not be much to look at, but they know how to subdue dragons and tigers and capture monsters and demons." The old man was not entirely convinced as he led the Tang Priest inside.



When they were inside, the old man asked the Tang Priest and his disciples to sit down. As they were sitting there talking another old man came in, leaning on a cane, and asked, "What evil spirits are you, coming to this pious household in the middle of the night?" The first old man rose, saying, "Stop shouting, elder brother. These aren't demons. This is an arhat sent from Great Tang in the East to fetch the scriptures." The old man bowed in greeting to the four of them.

After the food was set on the table, the old men showed the Tang Priest to the place of honour and then seated the three disciples. Not waiting for the Tang Priest to finish saying grace, Pig gulped down a bowl of rice in a single mouthful. He then downed seventeen or eighteen bowls, all the time shouting, "More food, more food!" In a minute he had eaten all the food on the table.

After the meal the Tang Priest asked, "What is your surname? Why were you holding that religious feast just now?" The second old man said, "Our name is Chen. I am Chen Cheng, and my brother is Chen Qing. It was a feast to prepare for death." "You must be telling a lie. How can you have a feast to prepare for death if there's no one dead here?" Pig said, laughing.

"Master, this place is called Chen Village. On the river bank is a temple, and in this temple is the Great King of Miraculous Response. Every year a boy and a girl have to be offered to him as sacrifice. Otherwise he sends disaster. This year it is our family's turn," Chen Qing said.

As he said this, he wailed, "I have an eight-year-old son called Chen Guanbao; my brother has an eleven-year-old daughter called Pan of Gold. Today we held this service to prepare for their death."

"Very well, then, bring your son out so I can take a look at him," Monkey said. Chen Qing hurried to the inner room and brought Guanbao out. Monkey shook himself and made himself look just like Guanbao. Then the two boys jumped and danced hand in hand. This gave the two old men such a shock that they fell to their knees.

Monkey rubbed his face and was himself once more. "I shall take the child's place and keep him alive for your family. I shall be offered to the Great King instead," said Monkey. After Chen Qing heard this, he bowed to Monkey, and Chen Cheng begged him to save his daughter's life, too.

Monkey grabbed Pig and said to Chen Cheng, "Don't worry! Let my long-snouted brother change into your daughter. We're going to save your children."

Chen Cheng hurried inside and came back with Pan of Gold. "She's much too small and delicate for me to turn into, brother," shouted Pig. "Hurry up if you don't want me to hit you," said Monkey. "Don't hit me," pleaded Pig in desperation. "I'll see if I can make the change."

Pig then said the words of a spell, shook his head several times, called "Change!" and really did make himself look like the little girl, but with a big belly. Monkey couldn't help laughing. He blew on him with magic breath and changed Pig to look exactly like the little girl.

After everything was ready, the old men asked Monkey and Pig to sit in red lacquer dishes and be carried into the temple to the sound of gongs and drums.

When the believers had set everything up properly, they all knelt down, bowed and burnt paper horses, then returned to the village. Monkey and Pig looked around and saw a tablet on which was inscribed, in letters of gold, GREAT KING OF MIRACULOUS RESPONSE. There were no statues of any gods.

They heard the wind howling, and a moment later an evil creature appeared in the temple. "Who is making the sacrifice this year?" asked the creature. Monkey replied with a smile, "This year it's the family of Chen Cheng and Chen Qing." This quick reply struck the monster as very odd. "The boy has a lot of courage," he thought.

"Usually I eat the boy first, but this year I shall start with the girl," said the monster. "Better to follow the old custom," said Pig in a panic. "Don't break with tradition." Without any more discussion the monster made a grab for Pig.

Pig was scared, and he turned back into himself. He struck at the monster's hand with his rake. The monster pulled his hand back and fled. All that could be heard was a mighty clang. Pig had knocked two or three dish-size fish scales from the monster's armour. Monkey also turned back into himself and shouted, "After him!"

The monster had come unarmed to his feast. He asked Monkey and Pig from a cloud, "Where are you from, monks? Why have you come here to spoil my offerings and ruin my reputation?" Monkey replied, "We are disciples of the holy priest Xuanzang from Great Tang in the East. We have heard you eat human beings, and we have come to call you to account!" At that the monster fled. He turned into a wild wind and went straight into the River of Heaven.

Having escaped with his life, the monster sat brooding silently in his river-bottom palace. His river clansmen all came with greetings. "I've long heard tell of the Tang Priest Xuanzang, whose flesh will make you immortal, but I never expected he would have such disciples. What shall I do?" the monster asked.

From among the watery tribe a colourfully dressed female mandarin fish slipped forward. She said, smiling, "Your Majesty, there will be no problem catching the Tang Priest if you reward me with a feast." "If you have a plan, I shall take you as my sworn sister, and we shall eat his flesh together," answered the monster. The fish was very happy, and she whispered into the monster's ear.

The fish asked the monster to call up the wind, make it snow and freeze the river. They planned to trick Xuanzang on his way, then catch him. "Marvellous, marvellous!" exclaimed the monster. He left his watery palace and went into the sky, where he produced wind and snow and made it so cold that the river froze.

The Tang Priest and his three disciples couldn't sleep because of the cold. When they opened the door to look outside in the morning, they were astonished to see a vast expanse of white. It was snowing.

It snowed harder and harder. Before long the snow was two feet deep. Xuanzang began to weep with anxiety. "I was hoping to ask for a boat to ferry us across the river, never expecting that Heaven would send this heavy snowfall. How can we go on our way?"

At dusk old Chen invited the Tang Priest into his garden to enjoy the snow scene. They could hear passers-by in the street saying, "Oh, it's cold today! The River of Heaven is frozen solid. People are walking on the ice!" Xuanzang wanted to go out and take a look. Old Chen said, "It's late now. Wait till morning."

Next morning the Tang Priest and his disciples went to the river and found it was frozen as smooth as a mirror. Pig raised his rake in both hands and brought it down with all his might. There was a hollow thump as nine white scars appeared on the ice. His hand had been painfully jarred. "We can go. It's frozen solid right down to the bottom."

The news delighted the Tang Priest, who led them all back to the Chen house and told them to prepare to travel. Seeing that repeated pleas were not going to make their visitors stay, the two old men gave them some food and a tray of silver and gold pieces. Xuanzang asked his disciples to take only the food, not the silver and gold. Then they said good-bye to the old Chens.

Not daring to delay, they hurried over the ice. The horse never rested a moment. As they were walking, they heard a loud crack under the ice, and the ice split, giving Monkey such a fright that he sprang into midair. The other three and the white horse sank into the water.

The monster had used his magic to make the ice split so he could capture Xuanzang. Back in his underwater palace the monster wanted to feast on the Tang Priest's flesh with the mandarin fish, but she asked him to wait a few days to make sure Xuanzang's disciples didn't make trouble.

The monster had Xuanzang locked away in a six-foot stone chest at the back of the palace.

Meanwhile Pig and Friar Sand had recovered the baggage in the river, loaded it on the back of the white horse and parting the waters, swam up to the surface. When Monkey saw them from the air, he asked, "Where's the master?" "He sank to the bottom of the river," Pig replied.

The three of them went to the Chen household. The two aged brothers burst into tears when they heard the Tang Priest had drowned in the river. "I'm certain the Great King of Miraculous Response has captured him by magic. My brothers and I will find the damned creature, rescue the master and wipe this monster out," said Monkey.

The three returned to the river bank. Monkey said, "You're both good swimmers. Who goes first?" Friar Sand answered. "Brother, let's carry you through the water. I think we should all go!" "Which of you will carry me?" asked Monkey.

Pig was secretly delighted at this question. "Goodness only knows how many times that ape has put one over on me," he thought. "Brother," he said, chuckling, "I'll carry you."

Realizing that Pig was up to something, Monkey decided to beat him at his own game. Friar Sand parted the waters of the River of Heaven to make a passage for the brother disciples. Monkey pulled out one of his hairs and turned it into a double of himself that he put on Pig's back, changing his real self into a louse that clung firmly inside of Pig's ear.

When they had covered thirty or forty miles on the riverbed, Pig suddenly stumbled, throwing Monkey forward and making him fall. As Monkey's double was only a transformed hair it floated away and disappeared.

"Brother," said Friar Sand to Pig, "why have you fallen over in the mud instead of walking along properly? Where have you dropped Monkey?" "He couldn't stop himself from falling," Pig replied, "and he's vanished. Never mind about him. We two will go and find the master."

"No," said Friar Sand, "we need him. He's no swimmer, but he's cleverer than we. If he's not coming, I won't go with you." Monkey could restrain himself no longer. "Brother," he shouted at the top of his voice from inside the ear, "I'm here!"

Friar Sand couldn't help laughing. Pig knelt in the mud and started to bow desperately, saying, "Brother, I did wrong. Please turn back into yourself. I'll carry you." "You've been carrying me all the time," said Monkey. "Now, get going, and fast!" Pig staggered to his feet, still mumbling apologies, and pressed on with Friar Sand.

After another thirty or forty miles they looked up to see a tall building on which was written in large letters RESIDENCE OF THE RIVER TURTLE. "This must be where the monster lives," said Friar Sand. "Is there water outside the door?" asked Monkey. "No," said Friar Sand.

"In that case you two hide near here while I take a look around," said Monkey. He shook himself, turned into a female shrimp with long legs and walked towards the door.

When Monkey reached the watery palace, he saw the monster and the female mandarin fish discussing how to eat the Tang Priest the next day, but he didn't see his master. He was very worried. Then he noticed another female shrimp coming over and learned from her that the Tang Priest was hidden in a stone chest at the back of the palace.

Monkey went straight round to the back of the palace and found the stone chest. He put his ear to it and listened. He could hear his master sobbing inside. He had expected his disciples to rescue him. Monkey could not restrain himself and called out, "Don't cry! I promise we'll save you when we've captured the monster."

Monkey went back to the main door, turned into himself again and called to Pig and Friar Sand. "The master is kept in a stone chest. You two challenge the monster to battle at once while I get out of the water. Capture him if you can, and if you can't, then pretend to be beaten and lure him out of the water for me to kill."

Raring to go, Pig and Friar Sand charged at the doors, yelling, "Damned monster, give us back our master!" The little devils inside rushed in panic to report.

Armed with weapons, the monster came out with his little devils. "Damned monster, give us back our master; otherwise my rake won't let you go!" shouted Pig.

With a mocking laugh the monster said, "That's fancy talk. If you don't make yourself scarce, I'll fight three rounds with you. If you're a match for me, I'll give you back your master, but if you're not, you'll be eaten too."

The monster raised his copper mace and struck at Pig's head. The three of them now became deadly foes. They fought a fine battle of four full hours under the water without either side winning.

Pig realized that they were not going to beat the monster and gave Friar Sand a nod. Pretending that they were beaten, the two of them turned and fled, trailing their weapons behind them. The monster didn't know it was a trick and pursued them closely.

Pig and Friar Sand leapt ashore. "He's coming, he's coming!" they shouted. "Take that!" Monkey struck at the monster with his cudgel. The evil spirit swerved to avoid it, then parried with his copper mace.

Before the two of them had fought three rounds, the monster, unable to keep up his resistance, sent up spray and plunged back into the water, whereupon the wind fell and the waves subsided.

"Thank you, brothers," said Monkey, going back up the high bank. "Brother," said Friar Sand, "you may not think that monster is much on shore, but he's a real terror underwater. Pig and I together were only as good as he alone. How are we going to rescue the master?"

"I'll trick him into coming out," said Pig. "You hide up in the air, and when you see his head above water, hit him good and hard on the forehead. Even if that doesn't kill him, his head will ache and he'll feel faint." "Good idea," said Monkey. "Go back quickly." The two went back into the water.

The monster fled in defeat to his palace, where the mandarin fish greeted him. "They have an accomplice on shore," the monster said. "He's a monk with a hairy face that looks like a thunder god's and fiery eyes with golden pupils. When they jumped ashore, he swung an iron cudgel at me. I couldn't keep it off me with my mace."

At this the mandarin fish shuddered. "Thank goodness, Your Majesty could see how good a fighter he was and ran away," she said. "You know, he is the Great Sage Equalling Heaven, who made havoc in Heaven five hundred years ago. He has enormous powers and can do all sorts of transformations. Your Majesty, you must not provoke him or have any more fights with him." The monster ordered his little demons to pile up rocks and make a clay cement to seal the door firmly shut.

When Pig and Friar Sand reached the door, Pig started to smash it with his rake. The door was barricaded by so many layers of clay and rocks that they had no hope of getting through. "Brother," said Friar Sand, "that demon has barricaded his door and won't come out. We'd better go back to the shore and discuss it with Monkey."

Monkey was waiting in the mist and clouds. When he saw the two emerge, he landed his cloud on the bank to meet them. "Why haven't you brought him up with you?" asked Monkey. Friar Sand told him everything. "You two patrol the bank and don't let the monster escape while I'm away," Monkey said.

Monkey set off at high speed on his auspicious cloud and headed for the Southern Sea to call on the Bodhisattva Guanyin. Before long he landed on Potaraka Island, where many devas came forward to bow in greeting and said, "The Bodhisattva knew you would be coming today. She told us to wait here to greet you."

After saying this, the devas left. Monkey had to wait for the Bodhisattva on a green rock.

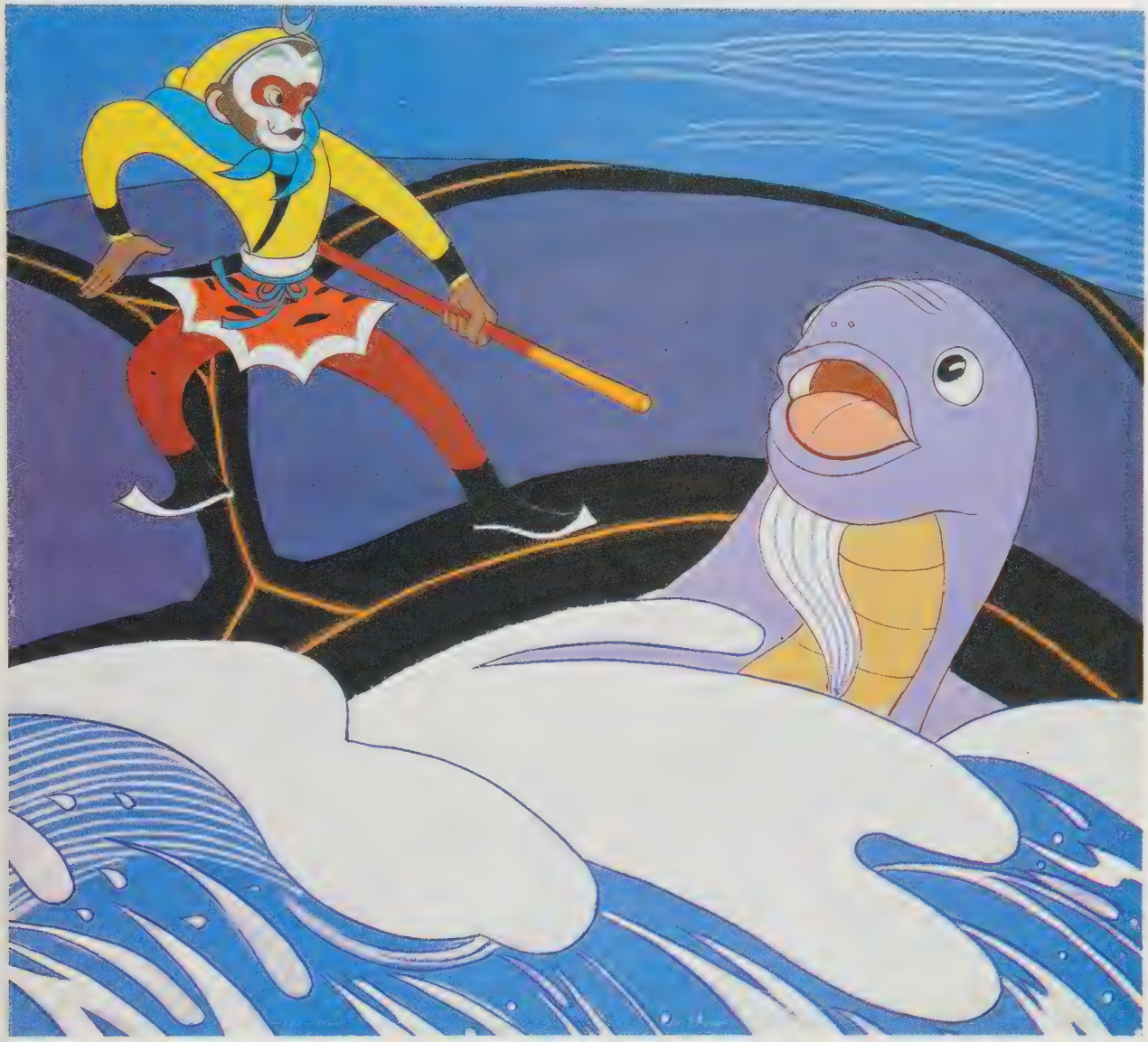
Before long the Bodhisattva emerged, carrying a basket. "Monkey," she said, "you and I are going to rescue the Tang Priest." Monkey fell to his knees and replied, "I beg you, Bodhisattva, to go quickly."

The Bodhisattva set off on an auspicious cloud. Monkey followed. In a moment they were on the bank of the River of Heaven. Pig and Friar Sand both knelt down to greet the Bodhisattva.

The Bodhisattva threw the basket into the river, then pulled it up through the current, reciting a spell. She raised the basket and it contained a glistening goldfish. "This goldfish is that monster. Originally it was a goldfish I raised in my lotus pool. Today I have come here to take him back," said the Bodhisattva.

Pig and Friar Sand cleared a way through the water straight to the watery palace. All the water monsters and fish spirits were now dead and rotten. Pig and Friar Sand opened the stone chest and carried the Tang Priest out of the water.

The Tang Priest and his disciples were discussing how they would get across the river when suddenly they heard a great shout coming from the river. Monkey ran to the river bank and discovered a huge turtle about forty feet around.



Monkey jumped onto the turtle's back and, his iron cudgel in his hand, shouted, "Come to the bank and I'll kill you with this." "The Residence of the River Turtle at the bottom of the river is my home. Nine years ago the evil monster took my home away from me. Now the monster is swept away and my house has been returned to me. I have come here to repay you," said the turtle.

Monkey's heart was warmed by this, so he put his cudgel away and asked his master and brothers to get on the turtle's back. They said good-bye to all, old and young, in Chen Village. Then the turtle looked back at the Tang Priest and said, "Would you please ask Lord Buddha in the Western Heaven when I shall be rid of this shell and able to take human form?" After Xuanzang had promised to ask, the turtle paddled towards the opposite river bank.

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